Tom Braden

Mayor Lindsay and Public Trust

SOME YEARS AGO I went to Allen W. Dulles who was the director of the Central Intelligence Agency and told him I had received information that some of the agency's funds were being used in a manner contrary to his intent. The source of my information, I explained to Dulles, was willing to meet with him to document the charges, but was not willing to meet with one of Dulles' deputies, who was in direct command of the operation.

The conflict my information posed for Dulles was a classic one, that is, public trust versus private confidence, his duty to examine a serious charge of malfeasance versus his duty to his own chain of command and to the mutual confidence which existed between himself and the deputy he had placed in charge.

Dulles did not agonize long over the problem. On the Sunday afternoon following our conversation, he met with my informant at a private place and listened to what he had to say. In the event the charges proved accurate a leak of funds was plugged and a source of future embarrassment eliminated, all with no more than momentary irritation to the deputy involved, who, as it turned out, simply didn't know what was going on.

THE STORY COMES to mind because I have been trying to account for the strange behavior of Mayor John Lindsay of New York, who was apparently placed in a position very similar to that in which I placed Dulles and who chose a different course of action.

According to testimony before New York's Knapp Commission, Mayor Lindsay was told by one of his assistants, Jay Kriegel, that two policemen had told him of corruption in the police force and that they wanted to meet with the mayor and detail the charges.

Mayor Lindsay explained his reaction as follows: ". . . the ground rules that were given me were that I could meet with them only in secret, neither at Gracie Mansion nor at City Hall, but in some secret place that I could not tell my police commissioner or any police official, nor could I report to them later . . .

"I told Kriegel that I could not under any circumstances as mayor accept those ground rules. Police Commissioner Leary had been onboard for a year and three months at this point. It would have undermined him totally. It would have been a signal to him of no confidence, and if I'd been a police commissioner under those circumstances I expect I'd have handed in my resignation . . ."

Thus Mayor Lindsay chose a private trust over a public trust, a loyalty to chain of command versus a loyalty to the people of New York. It was an odd choice, perhaps even a difficult choice. An explosion by a police commissioner against a mayor is clearly more difficult than an explosion by a deputy director in the Central Intelligence Agency, for example, against the director of the agency. But it was the wrong choice, so clearly the wrong choice as to raise questions about whether all the elements in the choice have come to light.

Surely, New York State's Scott Commission or New York's district attorney Frank Hogan, will have further questions for the mayor. If he can answer them without further embarrassment he will still be embarrassed. Enough to end any possibility of Lindsay being nominated for President or Vice President at the Democratic convention. Enough to make it hard to see how he can run for governor of New York two years from now.

We are, in sum, witnessing one of those public downfalls which come to able men who make wrong choices. The only public benefit from the fall of John Lindsay is a reminder of the old rule that public office is public trust and that public trust always supersedes.